

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY - Congressman Steny Hoyer and Prince George's Fire Chief Ronald Blackwell were joined by Professional Firefighters of Maryland President Leroy Wilkison and Maryland State Fireman's Association President Robert Jacobs today celebrated the addition of \$50 million to the House version of the fiscal year 2005 Homeland Security Appropriations bill, approved in the House of Representatives last month, for the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Firefighters or, Making Fighting Fires SAFER Program.

Funding for this historic new federal grant program was included in the Homeland Security Appropriations bill through adoption of an amendment offered by Congressman Hoyer. These funds will help career and volunteer fire departments hire new firefighters, recruit and retain volunteer fire fighters, and provide relief to the thousands of local fire stations across the country that are currently operating short of staff. Two-thirds of all professional and volunteer fire departments do not have sufficient personnel to adequately protect the public. Fire departments serving Prince George's County would be eligible to apply for assistance under this new grant program.

"I am pleased to join Chief Blackwell, President Wilkison and President Jacobs here today to announce the \$50 million I was able to secure last month as a down payment toward completely fulfilling our obligation to ensure that our nation's firefighters have at their disposal every resource possible to not only guarantee their own safety, but also to allow them to better serve each of our communities," said Congressman Hoyer.

"In addition to inadequate training and outdated equipment, which we already address through the fire grant program, insufficient staffing is a very real problem for far too many of our nation's, our state's, and our community's career and volunteer fire departments.

"To address this problem, the amendment I offered with Curt Weldon provides an initial appropriation of \$50 million for the SAFER program, which was authorized last year to help fire departments hire new full-time paid firefighters and recruit and retain volunteer firefighters.

Congressman Hoyer has been a longtime advocate for the Fire Service and is a co-chair of the Fire Caucus on Capitol Hill. He helped start the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program in 2001 because fire departments often have difficulty purchasing proper equipment. More than \$16 million in grant funding has been distributed to Fire Departments in Maryland thanks to this program. Fire departments that have received grants in Maryland's Fifth Congressional District

include La Plata, Hughesville, Mechanicsville, Solomons, Laurel, Prince George's County, Seventh District, Leonardtown, College Park, Cobb Island, and Second District.

Like the highly successful Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program, SAFER program grants will be awarded directly to career, volunteer, and combination (employing both career and volunteer firefighters) fire departments on the basis of need.

"I strongly believe we have an obligation to provide our firefighters with the necessary resources to perform their jobs as safely and effectively as possible. I am proud that the House adopted the Weldon-Hoyer amendment, which is an important first step toward meeting this obligation and bringing our nation's fire departments to adequate staffing levels that will improve the safety of our firefighters as they risk their lives in our defense every day," Hoyer added.

*The Senate must now pass the fiscal year 2005 Homeland Security Appropriations bill and then the differences in the two bills must be worked out in a Conference Committee before the bill may become law.*